

# Big Muddy tops group's list of endangered rivers

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JEFFERSON CITY - A national environmental group yesterday named the Missouri River as the nation's most-endangered river, firing another salvo in a hard-fought battle that often seems to revolve more around political strategy than environmental concerns.

This is the seventh straight year the Missouri has been featured on the annual list from American Rivers, a Washington, D.C.-based environmental organization. Last year, the Big Muddy was second on the list.

In a news release, the group said the 2,500-mile waterway faces "the most immediate, serious environmental degradation" in the nation.

The subtext, however, is the ongoing battle over the river's flow pattern. Last year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommended the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers revise its use of six dams on the upper Missouri to provide a "spring rise" on the river and to reduce flow in the summertime.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, backed by American Rivers, says existing flow patterns harm two endangered birds - the piping plover and the least tern - and an endangered fish called the pallid sturgeon. They say altering the flow pattern would restore the river to a more-natural state and foster the recovery of those species.

That opinion has placed the groups squarely at odds with state agencies that also are charged with environmental protection. Missouri politicians from both major political parties have denounced the flow proposal, and officials from the Departments of Conservation and Natural Resources say Fish and Wildlife's science is flawed.

DNR director Steve Mahfood said American Rivers does a "fantastic" job of monitoring river health around the country and that he wasn't surprised by its rankings. Still, he said, the groups' flow proposal doesn't mimic the Big Muddy's natural flow, and he questioned what the impact would be on endangered species.

"Also, we feel like the real beneficiaries of this plan are the Dakotas and Montana, because this plan is going to hold more water behind the dams on the upper Missouri ... and enhance motorized recreation, which has its problems with water pollution ... and other issues that nobody is addressing. Nobody is addressing what happens on the upper river when you increase recreation. What happens to water quality?"

Chad Smith, an American Rivers spokesman, said he has seen no studies showing a negative environmental impact from more recreation, and he rejected the idea that states on the lower Missouri would miss out on the benefits of the proposal.

"The Missouri is 2,500 miles long," Smith said. "There's a lot of room for people to spread out and engage in all kinds of recreation from Missouri to Montana. ... Because of the length of the Missouri and the vastness of the resource, I don't think necessarily overcrowding and boat pollution and those kinds of things are a major concern."

President George W. Bush had pledged during his campaign to oppose Fish and Wildlife's proposal, but all the squabbling leaves even the most plugged-in observers confused. Ken Midkiff of the Sierra Club said that while the river is "a mess," his group hasn't decided where the correct solution lies.

"I look to the DNR for advice on scientific issues, and we look to the Fish and Wildlife Service for scientific issues," Midkiff said. "Normally they're in agreement. ... We're not scientists, and we're going to have to involve some scientists who are members of the Sierra Club to help us figure it out."